

Highly Qualified for Successful Teaching: Characteristics Every Teacher Should Possess

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Abstract

This article examines the reflections of university students regarding the characteristics of their favorite teachers from whom they were able to learn. Data collected from the students indicates that there are twelve common characteristics that emerged as central to what students conceptualize as good teaching. Those twelve characteristics connect to the theme of caring for students, both academically and personally and strengthen recent indicators for “highly qualified” teachers. In reviewing effective teacher research, there is a strong link between what students characterize as good teaching and what the research reports as the traits of effective teachers. Awareness of these traits can help preservice teachers and inservice teachers develop qualities that are associated with effective teachers.

Introduction

In light of the *No Child Left Behind* law and the need for “highly qualified” teachers, state departments of education, institutions of higher learning, and school districts around the country are struggling to set criteria that designates educators as highly qualified. In a meta-analysis that focuses on empirical studies of teacher quality and qualifications, Rice (2003) found five broad categories of teacher attributes that appear to contribute to teacher quality: “(1) experience, (2) preparation programs and degrees, (3) type of certification, (4) coursework taken in preparation for the profession, and (5) teachers’ own test scores. Wayne and Youngs (2003) also targeted teacher quality in their analysis of studies that examined the characteristics of effective teachers and their link to student effectiveness. Similar to Rice, Wayne and Youngs examined ratings of teachers’ undergraduate institutions, teachers’ test scores, degrees and coursework, and certification status. They concluded that “students learn more from teachers with certain characteristics....Teachers differ greatly in their effectiveness, but teachers with and without different qualifications differ only a little” (p. 100-101). Berry (2002) posits that while these teacher qualities are indeed important they appear to have a “singular focus

on content knowledge” (p.1). Highly qualified teachers must also know “how to organize and teach their lessons in ways that assure diverse students can learn those subjects...Highly qualified teachers don’t just teach well-designed, standards-based lessons: They know how and why their students learn...” (p.2).

The literature on teacher characteristics makes a strong case for highly qualified teachers. Having over 60 years of teaching experience among us, the authors of this article found supporting data in a very unassuming place—from our students. At the beginning of each semester, we have asked our university students one very important question: What is it about your favorite teacher that made them teachers from whom you were able to learn? The answers are not surprising. The surprise is the consistency in the answers over time. Semester after semester, we collected data from students enrolled in our classes. At the beginning of a new semester, we engaged our students, all teacher candidates, in a discussion of what characterizes good teaching and they consistently recalled the very same characteristics year after year. These characteristics of teachers uniformly affect students in a positive way.

After analyzing the data over time, twelve themes emerged. In our readings and reflections about preparing teachers to create unique classrooms where students find success, we began to see how our students’ impromptu responses followed the growing body of research about effective teaching. What researchers have spent years discovering and writing about, our students knew already. Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf (2003) define effective teaching:

Most people would agree that good teachers are caring, supportive, concerned about the welfare of students, knowledgeable about their subject matter, able to get along with parents...and genuinely excited about the work that they do....Effective teachers are able to help students learn (p. 329).

Believing that a clear understanding of this data provides a meaningful addition and depth to the understanding of “highly qualified” for future teachers and inservice teachers, we have identified these characteristics of favorite teachers as indispensable for effective teaching.

The twelve personal characteristics of effective teachers our students recalled over and over revolve around an encompassing theme of caring. All of the twelve characteristics in some way epitomize this essential human trait. In her extensive writings about caring, Noddings (2001) explained that caring is exemplified in a multitude of ways including being attentive and receptive. As educators, we are responsive to the needs and feelings of our students. Noddings writes, “A caring teacher is someone who has demonstrated that she [he] can establish, more or less regularly, relations of care in a

wide variety of situations...[and] will want the best for that person” (p. 100-101). The relationship of teacher and student, giving and receiving care, is a continuous one, lasting over time and involving intimate and personal understanding. In addition, Noddings connects caring with preparation and organization. Students recognize caring in teachers who are prepared and organized. This philosophy of caring permeates the actions of teachers our students remember best.

Norlander-Case, Reagan, and Case (1999) clearly articulate the importance of being a nurturing teacher, calling for teachers who “have the capacity to nurture those in their care” (p. 53). Nurturing of students becomes a critical issue and enables students to learn and create. Effective teachers practice pedagogical nurturing in every lesson, in every human interaction. Supporting Noddings’ theory of caring, Norlander-Case, Reagan, and Case posit that “caring is cut from many fabrics, and the teacher...becomes the tailor—fashioning environments that are caring and that teach students to care for their learning and for one another” (p.62) Examining teacher affect also provides reinforcement of these characteristics that students find desirable in teachers. Borich (2000) explains:

A teacher who is excited about the subject being taught and shows it by facial expression, voice inflection, gesture, and general movement is more likely to hold the attention of students than one who does not exhibit these behaviors. This is true whether or not teachers consciously perceived these behaviors in themselves (p. 25).

Research on enthusiasm of the teacher is strongly connected to student success. (Bettencourt, Gillett, Gall, & Hull, 1983; Cabello & Terrell, 1994). Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf (2003) report that effective teachers are enthusiastic, have warmth, and possess a sense of humor. The authors clearly link these personality traits to student success.

How can universities and teacher educators teach their soon-to-be teachers and those who are already in the field to be “tailors” who are caring and nurturing? By looking and listening and reflecting upon the words of the students themselves. We have compiled a grocery list of 12 characteristics that when simmered together, stirred lovingly, and warmed to perfection result in nurturing teachers who understand the importance of caring for their students and impact student achievement.

Fairness. Every university student we surveyed listed fairness as one of the characteristics of their favorite teachers. As humans, we possess an ingrained sense of fair play. Whenever we are dealt with by someone in a manner that violates what we think constitutes fairness in the situation, we react negatively. Any semblance of

favoritism, or lack of fairness, can leave scars that last a lifetime. While feelings and competition between classmates can be intense, the memories of unfair teachers are reported by our college students in great detail, even after many years have passed since those negative school experiences.

Positive Attitude. Another characteristic that repeatedly appeared on our students' list of teacher characteristics was the positive attitude and approach that teachers brought into the classroom. Borich (2000) suggests that effective teachers are those who use "meaningful verbal praise to get and keep students actively participating in the learning process" (p.15). Cruickshank, Jenkins & Metcalf (2003) write that effective teachers are generally positive minded individuals who believe in the success of their students as well as their own ability to help students achieve. As we all know, there are people in life who are inclined to see the glass half empty and there are others who usually see it half full. It is important to "catch students doing things right" rather than "catching them doing something wrong." Effective teachers develop ways to remind themselves to do this, and the impact on students can last many years. Our students often recall praise and recognition that teachers gave them as young students, and they point to the confidence and direction that often resulted in their lives.

Preparedness. It is easy for students to tell if a teacher is prepared for class. Even young children know when a teacher is organized and ready for the day's lessons. According to our informal surveys, nothing frustrates a student more than to come to class and be assaulted by a teacher who has no idea what he or she is doing. Competence and knowledge of the content area being taught is something that our college students have always mentioned about their favorite teachers and is *strongly* supported by the current literature. Our students pointed out that in classrooms where teachers were well prepared, behavior problems were less prevalent. The well-prepared teacher is more likely to be able to take time during lessons to notice and attend to behavioral matters, and is less likely to miss the beginnings of potentially disruptive activity. If, on the other hand, teachers have not invested sufficient time in planning and preparation, they tend to be so focused on what they are doing that they miss the early signs of misbehavior. This ultimately results in frequent disruption, waste of valuable instructional time, and student frustration.

Personal Touch. Our students have always mentioned the fact that their favorite teachers connected with them in a personal way. Teachers who convey a personal touch with their students call their students by name, smile often, ask about students' feelings and opinions, and accept students for who they are. Teachers who bring their lives and stories into the classroom build trust with their students. Teachers who tell stories of events in their own lives which relate to subject matter currently being taught, captivate student interest and promote bonding with the students. Additionally, teachers who have

gotten close to their students have done so by finding out as much about their students as possible. Teachers who show interest in their students have interested students.

Sense of humor. Our students fondly remembered teachers for their sense of humor. If a teacher has a quick wit and the ability to break the ice in difficult situations with the use of humor, this is an extremely valuable asset. According to McDermott & Rothenberg (2000) students enjoy teachers with a sense of humor and found those teachers made learning fun. As long as it is not at any individual's expense, good teachers can occasionally enjoy a laugh with the class and they can also laugh at themselves. Students recognize the strength reflected in teachers who are not threatened by foolish or silly mistakes that they make. Since students sometimes find themselves in similarly embarrassing situations, good teachers can provide a wonderful model for how to deal with an embarrassing situation effectively.

Creativity. Many of our students remembered unusual things that their teachers did in their teaching and the creative ways that they decorated the classroom or motivated the students. For example, one teacher was remembered for an old bathtub painted green and fill with pillows and books, designated the "Reading Tub". Another teacher was remembered for an igloo that she had in the back of her room. Constructed out of plastic bottles glued together in the shape of an igloo, it provided an enclosure into which children who earned the privilege could go and work quietly on puzzles and word-finds. Other teachers had large trunks in their elementary room full of dress-up clothes, offering a fun activity for rainy days. Some teachers were remembered specifically for their unique ways of motivating their class. One teacher had challenged the class to reach a particular academic goal. If they did, she promised to kiss a pig. They reached the goal and she kissed the pig!

Willingness to admit mistakes. Something that we all appreciate in others is their willingness to admit mistakes, and it is also long remembered by students. Like everybody else, teachers make mistakes. Unfortunately, some teachers think that their authority in the classroom can be undermined by these mistakes and they try to let them go unnoticed or cover over them quickly. Students quite obviously have a different opinion. They are fully aware of the times when teachers make mistakes, especially when they somehow suffer from them. Teachers who recognize their mistakes and apologize for them when they affect the students provide an excellent model to give students, and a great way to be remembered as a favorite teacher.

Forgiving. Most of us have a bad habit of labeling others, and those labels can sometimes stick for as long as we know the person. They become "lifers" for us, and our interactions with these students are consistently colored by what we expect to see. All those associated with education know that there are frequently personality conflicts

between teachers and students. It is often blamed on bad “chemistry.” Whatever the cause, it can have a disastrous effect on the child caught in this relationship, and can result in a year of frustration and academic failure. Our students had plenty of memories of teachers who “had it in for” one student or another, but their accounts of favorite teachers reflected a willingness to forgive students for misbehavior and a habit of starting each day with a clean slate.

Respect. Teachers universally wish for their students to respect them. We have found from discussions with our students that those who are given the highest amount of respect are those who give respect to their children. Favorite teachers were remembered for keeping grades on papers confidential, for speaking to students privately after misbehavior or when the teacher needed some clarification, in contrast to public rebuke. Favorite teachers were remembered for showing sensitivity for feelings and for consistently avoiding situations that would unnecessarily embarrass students. Such behavior is obviously appreciated by students, and according to those in our classes, repaid with respect and love for the teacher.

High expectations. Our students often have mentioned the expectations that their favorite teachers held for them. According to Irvine (2001) “students defined caring teachers as those who set limits, provided structure, held high expectations and pushed them to achieve” (p. 6-7). Teachers with positive attitudes also possess high expectations for success. Gill and Reynolds (1999) report that students of teachers with high expectations learn more as teachers’ expectations rise. Teachers’ expectation levels affect the ways in which teachers teach and interact with students. In turn, these behaviors affect student learning. Generally, students either rise to their teachers’ expectations or do not perform well when expectations are low or non-existent. The best teachers were remembered as having the highest standards. They consistently challenged their students to do their best. Many of our students reported that they had little confidence in themselves as youngsters. Parents or siblings had told them that they were dumb and the children believed it to be true. When their teachers expressed the fact that they believed in their ability, it served to energize them and encourage them to reach new heights. Some ended up choosing careers in areas that they were originally encouraged in by these teachers. Expectations are often self-fulfilling, and must therefore be expressed with care and consideration. Favorite teachers apparently have a talent for doing that.

Compassion. Hopefully, school is a place where children can learn and be nurtured in an emotionally safe environment. The reality of most classrooms, and in fact just about any gathering of youngsters, includes a significant amount of cruelty and hurt feelings. All insensitive, uncaring, or deliberately malicious behavior cannot be eliminated from such situations, but a caring teacher can have a tremendous impact on its frequency. Students have related numerous stories over the years about how the

sensitivity and compassion of a favorite teacher affected them in profound and lasting ways. Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf (2003) report that effective teachers are supportive of students in multiple ways and help to meet their needs for belonging and success. These teachers were remembered for noticing when children were left out of games on the playground and for taking action to prevent such things from happening. Such simple actions eliminated the embarrassment that many children have to face everyday. And from our students' recollections, it was clear that such wise behavior was remembered vividly years later.

Sense of belonging. One thing repeatedly mentioned by our students was the fact that they felt like they belonged in the classrooms taught by favorite teachers. They recalled that these teachers developed a sense of family in their classrooms. A variety of strategies, long used by teachers in the classroom, were remembered. Classroom pets, random act of kindness awards, class picture albums, and cooperative class goals were employed to build a sense of unity and companionship. In addition, emphasis was placed on maintaining an emotionally safe classroom. Good teachers also took strong measures to prevent mean and hurtful behavior like teasing and bullying. Effective teachers know well that when children feel emotionally, as well as, physically safe, they learn far better.

Conclusion

Conversations with our students over the years have provided valuable data for every teaching professional to consider. Students have consistently recounted stories about teachers who exhibit similar characteristics. These twelve characteristics—displaying fairness, having a positive outlook, being prepared, using a personal touch, possessing a sense of humor, possessing creativity, admitting mistakes, being forgiving, respecting students, maintaining high expectations, showing compassion, and developing a sense of belonging for students—center around the theme of caring. When demonstrated by classroom teachers, our students remembered school in a positive way. Data supporting the twelve characteristics of favorite teachers correlate with recent research data as to the characteristics effective teachers possess. These traits have proven to increase student achievement. Whether one is new to the teaching profession or a seasoned professional, working to include these traits into everyday teaching routines or fine-tuning those already in use, will ensure that students have a positive school experience as well as a successful one.

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